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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to examine the effect of individual conferences on the performance of students in a junior college composition program. A review of the literature on conferencing led to the hypothesis that students who had individual conferences would improve their writing significantly more than those students who did not. In both the control group and the conference group, the same amount of reading and writing was assigned each week. The results of this study indicate that it is questionable to invest the amount of time spent in six conferences, as was done in this study. Beyond the first two conferences the data indicated the students did not learn any more than if they spent the time in class. (RB)

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RESEARCH ON INDIVIDUAL COMPOSITION CONFERENCES

by Myrna J. Smith and Barbara A. Bretcko

At Somerset County College (New Jersey) one of the continuing discussions between faculty and administration is the kind and amount of contact the teacher is to have with the students. Since . : College is systems-based with heavy emphasis on the use of media, including large group and individual taped instruction, little encouragement was given when three members of the English Faculty decided to use individual student conferences an an integral part of our composition program. We were successful in getting limited financial support for our program for several reasons: first, at least two junior colleges in New Jersey are using composition conferences extensively; secondly, I proposed to do an empirical study that would measure the effectiveness of the conferences, and thirdly, and undoubtedly mainly, we did not ask that we be given fewer than the 160 students provided for in the faculty contract. (Actually none of us assigned the full 160 students in composition, but one of the teachers involved with conferences had 130 students in composition plus about thirty in a literature course).

Individual composition conferences are not new; teachers, particularly in the high schools have been using them for at least fifteen years and probably longer than that. One of the earliest reports was done by my own major professor, Dr. Janet Emig of Rutgers University, who reported in 1961 (English Journal, April, 1961) successful use of conferences in the

improvement of student writing. She reported as did others that the conferences gave the teacher the opportunity to point out writing errors, and make special individual assignments for the elimination of those errors. Conferences also gave the students an opportunity to discuss their ideas and motivated them to make serious attempts to communicate those ideas. Dr. Karl E. Oelke of Unicn Junior College (New Jersey) who has spoken about his department's use of conferneces and who has written unplublished position papers on their use states the following:

> "Individual, person to person communication complements and gives depth to the classroom experience for a variety of reasons. First, it provides for the necessary personal attention, outside the presures of the classroom situation. Second, it fosters genuine communication in that the student can respond, express his beliefs, intentions, and desires on a face-to-face basis. Third, it allows (even demands) that the teacher devote time to the more advanced student as well as the shy, less advantaged student who most obviously needs his assistance. Fourth, it concretely expands the content of the course by transcending mere writing and approaching the affective domain, the motivation, in the broadest sense of the word, which brings the student not only to his English course but also to life itself."

Hearing Dr. Oelke and reading about others encouraged me to hypothesize that students who had individual conferences would improve significantly more than those who didn't, and to set up this empirical study at Somerset County College. Our composition students meet two times in a regular class of twenty-five to thirty-three students. The third meeting is in an independent study laboratory where students listen to tapes about various aspects of writing. The first program which all students do is called Exploratory Writing, a four-week program in which students are asked to respond to various

stimuli without concern for form or mechanics. The second program is a combination of basic writing errors and basic composition, consisting of about twenty-five tapes with response materials on such messy problems as run-on sentences, use of the comma, transitions, introductions and paragraphing. Some students are assigned many of these tapes; some are assigned none, but the majority of students are assigned four or five. The last program deals with semantics to which all students are assigned.

Last fall when I carried out this study, I was assigned four sections of composition: two classes became the control group, that is they met in the regular pattern of two class meetings and one lab each week. Two classes became the experimental group: for most of the semester they had only one regular class meeting along with one lab and one individual conference with me each week. My colleague who participated in this study was not able to use individual conferences because of her large student numbers, but she did some group conferences that I will discuss later.

At the beginning of the semester I met all classes twice a week for testing and orientation. Again at the end I met all classes twice a week for closing procedures and testing. During the middle ten weeks I had conferences with the experimental students on all class papers written. The lab assignments generate shorter papers that I did not deal with in conferences. Because of one week being disrupted for Thanksgiving and one for a personal matter, I scheduled six conferences with each student; I don't believe that anyone

included in the final statistics had fewer than five.

In both the two-class and the conference classes I assigned the same amount of reading and writing. Each week I usually spent one period discussing the reading, most of which was short fiction, which I use as sources for ideas as well as examples for expresion. The other period in the two-class or control group was spent discussing student papers, errors, and other problems dealing with composition.

Students in the conference sections made appointments with me. Because I had over fifty students in the conference section, I found it impossible to read the themes in advance. Instead I had the student bring two copies of his/her theme so that I could read and mark the paper as the student read it to me. I made notations by any particular good or bad spots, which helped remind me to discuss them with the student; it also gave them something to look at after they left the conference. In the conference I found I was compelled to say good things first about the paper. I always try to make positive written comments when I grade conventionally, but there have been times when I couldn't find a positive word. Not so when the student was there beside me. If there were particularly weak parts in a theme, I frequently asked the students where they had difficulties. They could generally tell me. Other techniques that my colleague and I used included asking the student what grade the paper should receive, then tell what had to be done to make the paper deserve and "A" grade. They were amazingly accurate. If anything they graded themselves lower that we. The main thing we were concerned with was to avoid giving individualized lectures.

We tried to formulate questions that would make the student aware of language and the writing process. Since most of my conferences were during the period that the lab assignments dealt with mechanical errors, I went over mechanical errors and made lab assignments at the end of the conference. I purposely dealt with mechanics last, mainly because I didn't want to over-emphasize their importance. Also then the last thing I left them with was an assignment to be completed before we were to meet again. Each student kept a manilla folder for lab work, graded essays, and notes written by me. I did try to keep a log for each student, but it was difficult to write enough each time. Generally the notes were a couple of words.

At the beginning of the course all the students wrote an in-class essay on the topic used for the NCTE high school writing contest: "Anne Morrow Lindburg said in her recent book Hour of Gold, Hour of Lead that to become wise, one must first experience suffering." They also took the McGraw-Hill Basic Skills standardized test for writing. On the last two days of classes, but not at the final exam, the students again took the McGraw-Hill standarized test--the other form--and wrote another essay on a topic that my colleague and I determined to be comparable. The topic was, "All really important events in one's life are essentially private and cannot be shared." For both the before and after essays the students were directed to support or refute the statement, using

personal experience, examples from literature and their observations of others to support their position. We selected these two topics because they are abstract, yet they are the types of topics that students would have experience with, topics that they could use personal experience to make a point. Whether these theme topics are comparable is one of the questions of this study.

Unfortunately, the last week of classes when we scheduled both the final essay and the basic skills standardized test, we had a snow storm followed by flooding. Since we are a commuter school, many students missed one or the other of the final tests, and therefore had to be eliminated from the statistical analysis.

The before and after themes were given to three qualified graders. One is a doctoral candidate, one a university professor, and the third our regular grader. They were not told which themes were the pre-tests and which were the post-tests. The themes were graded on a scale from a top of one to a low of five on the following four points:

1. Over-all effectiveness: to be rated on a scale from 1 - 5: Rater must use all five values. Raters will be given no guidance on this parameter.

2. Ideas: to be rated on a scale from 1 - 5. Raters are to look for original, clear, and/or well thought out ideas. Logic in thinking would be evaluated here.

3. Organization: to be rated on a scale from 1 - 5. Raters are to look for a clear plan for presenting ideas.

4. Language: to be rated on a scale from 1 - 5. Raters are to look for good diction, specific words, good details, etc.

I spent my Christmas vacation counting filled-in blanks

on the standardized test and the errors in the essays. The errors were divided into major errors, minor errors, and spelling errors. The major errors included: (1) noncommunicative fragments and garbled sentences, (2) run-on sentences, but not comma splices, (3) verb tense errors, and (4) subject-verb agreement errors. All other errors including punctuation, capitalization, reference, etc. were considered minor errors.

The data were analyzed by analysis of variance using Harvey's Least Squares and Maximum Likelihood General Purpose Program. Table 1 summarizes the before and after scores for the 54 students involved in the study.

TABLE 1

	Before	After
Standard Scores	46.4	48.9*
Overall	3.4	2.8*
Ideas	3.2	2.6*
Organization	3.5	2.9*
Language	3.4	2.9*
Major Errors	2.2	1.8
Minor Errors	4.9	5.5
Spelling	2.9	2.5

*P < 5% level

The standard scores on the McGraw-Hill Basic Skills Writing Test indicate that our students made significant progress. However they ended the course below the national mean, which is fifty. The students also made significant progress in all four categories that the graders rated. Although these particular figures are from grader one, grader two was almost identical as can be seen in Table 2.

TABLE 2: Means for Graders

	1	2	3
Overall	3.1	3.1	3.7*
Ideas	2.9	3.1	3.6*
Organization	3.2	3.0	3.6*
Language	3.1	3.0	3.6

*$P < .05$

Grader three rated the papers significantly lower than the other two.

There was no significant difference in the numbers of major, minor, or spelling errors between the before and after essays. These numbers may be misleading because I counted the total numbers of errors rather than calculating the error rate. My reason is obvious: I did not want to count the words in all the papers. I did, however, count the words of the papers of four randomly selected students. The number of words increased by an average of 70 words, from an average of 170 words in the pre-test to an average of 240 words in the post-test. If all of the students were that much more fluent, I believe there is a reduction in error rate.

Another analysis that came out of this study is the correlation among the parameters that were measured as shown in Table 3.

TABLE 3: Correlation Coefficients

	Ideas	Organ.	Lang.
Overall	.83	.83	.69
Ideas		.71	.56
Organ.			.70

Again these correlations were for grader one, but the others followed this pattern of the highest correlation being between ideas and overall and the lowest being between language and ideas. These high correlations indicate that perhaps just an overall score would be adequate unless one especially wanted information on language.

Table 4 summarizes the data that we were mainly concerned with in this study. It compares the students who had two classes with those who had one class and a conference.

TABLE 4: Treatment Effect

	2 Class		Conference	
Standard Score	46.5	49.7	46.3	48.1
Overall	3.5	2.7	3.2	2.8
Ideas	3.3	2.7	3.1	2.6
Organization	3.7	2.9	3.4	3.0
Language	3.4	2.9	3.4	3.0
Major Errors	2.1	1.6	2.3	2.0
Minor Errors	4.6	4.9	5.1	6.1
Spelling	2.5	2.4	3.2	2.5

There is no difference in the progression (or in the regression) as in the case of minor errors between the two groups. The conference students progressed no more than the students with whom I did not have regular conferences. My hypothesis was shown to be incorrect.

One final bit of data that I collected involved student attitude. Each semester we give students questionaires that ask students their opinion about the teachers and the quality of the instruction. One question on the form that I used was as follows:

How well did the instructor make known ways to improve your writing?

1	2	3	4	5
I always knew how to improve my writing.		Sometimes I knew how to improve my writing.		I was never aware how to improve my writing.

The students that were in the control group averaged 1.7 whereas the students with whom I had had regular individual conferences averaged 2.2.

The results of this study indicate that it is questionable to invest the amount of time one must in order to have regular individual conferences.

The published articles that I had read previously indicated that the quality of the class improved when the students had to face the teacher on the more equal basis of the conference. I, therefore, expected that students would respond better and have a good attitude in class after they had had several conferences with me. That, in fact, did not happen. One of the control classes was good in that persons responded to readings, asked questions, and seemed genuinely interested in the course. One was terrible -- one of the worst I have ever had -- in that students rarely came to class prepared (for some I could just leave off the prepared since attendance was so poor), handed in work late, and in general did not respond to the activities of the class. The same was true of the conference classes except not to the extreme degree of the other two classes; one was co-operative and responsive, the other apathetic and unresponsive.

In my opinion the conferences had diminishing returns. The first one or two with each student were helpful: they learned where my office was; they learned that I was sincerely interested in them as a writer; they learned that I responded in a human way to their writing. But since the data show that they did not learn any more about writing than if they had been in a class, I had to think more clearly about what happened in later conferences. By the fifth or sixth conference students were still plagued by the same difficulties, and the conferences seemed more like a repeat of previous ones. One of my recommendations that emerges from this study is that teachers who want to use conferences should have one or two conferences in a one-semester course, or if the course extends over a year the teacher could conduct three or four well-placed conferences.

One positive aspect that came out of this study was the change in my own view of student writing. Having the students read their themes aloud was a most satisfactory experience. I developed a new appreciation for the student's writing and a better feeling for the student as a writer. Somehow having the students there reading a creation of their own gave composition reading a new dimension. I think that experience was true for some of the students also. Some liked knowing that what they wrote was actually going to communicate an idea to someone and liked being there to participate in that communication. Others, however, hated having to read what they had written.

My colleague who was also working with conferences decided to hold group conferences for two reasons: first her student numbers were very high as noted earlier, and secondly, she recognized early the diminishing returns of the individual conferences. Four to six students met with the instructor, conferring with each other and with her about the strengths and weaknesses of the writing. She followed the same procedure as I did in that students brought two copies of their papers, one to be read aloud and one to be corrected by the instructor as the student read.

Because the groups did seem to provide added incentive for the students, they became a regular part of the conference schedule. The peer pressure involved in group conferences seemed to have two important effects. First of all, it made students a little more conscious of their writing style than they were when only the instructor would read/hear a paper. Secondly, and more importantly, the groups added to the student's feeling of writing as a communicative process, since part of a group discussion invariably centered on what was said as well as how it was said. (For further discussion of this topic, please see the article "The small-group approach to writing" by Julie Thompson Klein which appears in the NCTE bulletin Measure for Measure, Classroom Practices in Teaching English, 1972-73.)

Certainly, there needs to be more empirical data on the effect of individual conferences, especially, from an institution which has an administrative commitment to them.

For example, at Union Junior College referred to earlier, the administration supports the faculty position that conferences are useful. The student load, therefore, is about sixty-five students in composition. In addition to meeting in three classes a week, each student also has from five to eight theme analysis conferences during the semester. These conferences are held not only during the basic first semester course, but also during the second semester when the emphasis of the course is on the study of literature. An empirical study over a year's time at such an institution would be more meaningful than the one we conducted.

I do not believe that our study indicates that individual conferences are not worthwhile. In fact we know that they were beneficial to some students. The point is simply that a system which requires all students to meet individually with the instructor on a weekly basis takes more man-hours (or rather, peoplehours) than we could justify in terms of empirical results. But we do not plan to discontinue conferences. We took on this project hoping to find that one instructional method could produce significant results among a broad range of students. Our results merely reaffirmed what we suspectd: there is no magic formula.

But there was a little magic. Meeting with a student face-to-face may not transform a "C" writer into a Pulitizer Prize - winner, but it does transform students and teachers into people. We got to know our students much better than we ever could have had we met them only in the traditional classroom situation. As a result we found that we could occasionally

alleviate compostion-related anxiety attacks as well as cases of chronic comma faults. Certainly the two diseases are related, and while there are a variety of ways of coping with commas, conferences do more to ease anxiety than any other method we have tried.

So next semester we will try again. We haven't yet worked out our system, but we know that we will not require every student to meet with us every week or even every other week. Some may still do that, while others will meet with their instructors only once or twice a semester. Others will meet in group conferences. Still others may only feel the sharp edge of the grade. The only thing we know for sure is that the first thing we will do in each compostion class is post a list of office hours.